Introduction

On March 19, in the seventeenth year of the Chongzhen period (1628–1644), Zhu Youjian, the last emperor of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), hanged himself when the rebel troops of Li Zicheng (1605–1644; *ECCP*, pp. 491–493) were about to overwhelm the capital city. Learning of the emperor’s death, the vice censor-in-chief, Shi Bangyao (1586–1644), also committed suicide. Before taking his life, Shi lamented the following in a suicide poem: “Ashamed of being unable to come up with even half a plan to defuse the present crisis/I can only choose death to return the favor I have received from my lord” (see chapter 4 for further discussion). Several decades later, when reading this suicide poem, the early Qing thinker Yan Yuan (1635–1704; *ECCP*, pp. 912–915) was moved to tears. What struck him most must have been the “feminine” helplessness evoked in Shi Bangyao’s characterization of his act of loyalty/chastity.¹ The first line of the couplet is a minister’s confession of incompetence, whereas the second line captures the feminine gesture of a woman committing suicide to vindicate her chastity. Elsewhere Yan Yuan insisted that the loyal Ming ministers who committed suicide after the collapse of the Ming dynasty could be remembered at best as “the chaste women of the inner chambers [*guizhong yifu*].”²

For Yan Yuan, the celebrated image of a chaste woman committing suicide to vindicate her chastity was becoming increasingly problematic, especially after the fall of the Ming dynasty, a tragedy Yan Yuan attributed in part to the feminization of many Confucian literati and their resultant inability to carry out their manly duties. A common rhetoric of the discourse on the fall of the Ming was that whereas a large number of chaste women had demonstrated tremendous moral courage and unflinching loyalty during the national disaster, many men, in sharp contrast, had behaved in unmanly fashion. Yan Yuan, however, seemed to question whether it was appropriate to compare these men with chaste female martyrs when “effeminacy” was precisely the issue. The fact that many officials and generals had to resort to suicide like chaste women was itself a telling indictment since suicide would not have been necessary had they been competent enough to
achieve victories on the battlefield. According to people like Yan Yuan, there was something inherently feminine about the act of suicide.3

The ambivalence and anxiety associated with the image of chaste women found in Yan Yuan’s writings point to one of the central issues explored in this study—namely, the complicated and often opposite roles assigned to the female “other” in a man’s negotiation of his identity in late imperial China. Students of Chinese gender history have long been struck by the prominent presence of women in traditional male literati discourses of self-representation. How this apparent prominence of the feminine shaped the construction of masculinities in the late imperial discourses is a topic I seek to explore.

In most of the works examined in this study there generally are two common strategies for constructing and negotiating masculinity. The first, which I would call the strategy of analogy, is to construct masculinity in close association with the feminine; the second, or the strategy of differentiation, is to define masculinity in sharp differentiation from feminine. In both cases women bear the burden as the ultimate defining “other,” although various “lesser” men could also serve as “others” in this negotiating process. In most cases, both strategies are simultaneously employed, although the emphases can vary considerably. In this study, “femininity” is a rather broad concept, denoting a wide range of gender phenomena associated with women, from the castrated (emasculated) to the marginalized and from the politically and socially destabilizing (prostitutes, plotting palace women, eunuchs, etc.) to the exemplary women celebrated in Confucian chastity discourse.

The analogy strategy is more likely to be found in texts where the image of a woman is, paradoxically, appropriated as a positive metaphor to promote the male literati author’s own desirability or visibility in front of a male audience. Despite their pretense of femininity, these discourses are almost always homosocial in that they are by and for men.4 In a patriarchal society such as that of late imperial China, masculinity was most likely a homosocial enactment since what mattered to a man most were the judgments and scrutiny of other men, while women’s opinions, if ever expressed or heard, were seldom taken into serious consideration. A man’s anxiety over being perceived as not masculine enough could be alleviated only when he was persuaded that such a perception was not shared by other men.

One example of the analogy strategy is that male literati poets often performed poetic “transvestism” by presenting themselves as “neglected but still faithful wives or concubines” to vindicate their Confucian virtues or to express their frustrations so that their values as virtuous men would be better appreciated by other men in superior positions. This transvestistic rhetoric can also be found in other kinds of discourse, such as political treatises and other more personal writings of scholar-officials. Here, comparing oneself to a woman is only a masking strategy of self-re/masculinization. To profess that one is in the dominated group (like a woman) is a subtle tactic
to seek approval from the dominant groups and, consequently, gain eventual domination in relation to male peers by moving oneself into a more advantageous position. This is a strategy of re/positioning. In practice, however, such tactics may have many different consequences that tend to complicate the gender status of the transvestite, pointing to his dual-gender position: he is a woman in relation to the ruler or superior, and yet precisely because they recognize his feminine position, he is able to move into a more masculine place in relation to other men (see chapter 2).

Related to poetic transvestism is what I would call narrative transvestism, which characterizes many works of fiction and drama that focus on romantic love. Here it is often a woman who masquerades as a man in order to escape from an unwanted marriage or to pursue a career. Such narrative transvestism seems to assume an interchangeability between men and women. Indeed, in many novels and plays, a romantic and handsome man is almost always praised for his feminine looks and delicate manners. Here ideal male beauty is largely defined as a feminine quality. A man’s fair skin, refined looks, and elegant manners—qualities supposedly admired by both men and women—testify to a man’s cultural sophistication and therefore his superior moral virtue, and a feminine-looking man is often presented as the embodiment of such sophistication and virtue (see chapter 7).

This analogous gender rhetoric seems to have a basis in the yin-yang correlative thinking that underpinned almost all the cultural discourses in pre-twentieth-century China. Yin and yang originally referred to the shady and sunny sides of a hill. In the correlative thinking system, they are concepts describing relationships among things in the universe. Consequently, in theory, they do not have fixed meanings, despite the fact that yin is often associated with the female and yang with the male. A wife is in the yin position in relation to her husband, while the latter is supposed to be in the yang position. However, this same husband occupies the yin position in relation to his superior. Here the yin-yang concept is mainly a notion of positionality. In other words, yin qualities do not belong to women only; by the same token, a man does not monopolize yang qualities. This assumed sharing of yin and yang qualities between men and women appears to have made possible the kinds of rhetorical analogies often evoked in poetry, such as that between a frustrated literatus and an abandoned woman (see chapters 1 and 2).

This interchangeability between the masculine and the feminine can also be found in traditional medical theories about the body. In a study of the concept of gender in Chinese medical history, Charlotte Furth points out the following:

The notion that the bodies of males and females are homologous along a shifting continuum of mixed and interpenetrating substances and energies means that there are more multiple possible configurations of yin and yang within the
body that might vary in individuals according to time and circumstance. None-theless, even as each individual body is ideally configured as balanced between yin and yang forces, this balance is not stable, and the normal probability is that most males will tilt toward a preponderance of yang qualities, while in females an affinity for yin ones will prevail. Thus yin and yang come to name masculine or feminine aspects of the bodily nature over a range of proportions that vary according to the individual.7

Furth argues that traditional Chinese medical discourse conceptualized an androgynous body that “has no morphological sex, but only gender.”8 What determines an individual’s gender identity, according to this theory, is the individual’s specific mix of yin and yang substances. If an individual tilts toward a preponderance of yang qualities, then this individual is considered a male, while a female tilts toward a preponderance of yin qualities. The gender model envisioned here is a continuum from yang to yin rather than “either masculine or feminine.” In other words, the distinctions between genders are assumed to be relative rather than absolute. Of course, in specific social and cultural practices, there are other important factors; for example, social status and social roles perform important functions in determining an individual’s gender identity, which is ultimately positioned in a rigid social hierarchy. In fact, this relativistic gender model envisioned in traditional Chinese medical discourse by no means precludes hierarchiza-tion: “From one aspect male and female bodies are identical or homologous and gender difference is a relativistic and flexible aspect of the body. From another aspect the bodily powers associated with sexuality and generation participate in the gendered hierarchical ordering of the human microcosm and the macrocosm of Heaven and Earth.”9 Furth’s observation should help to explain the fluid gender boundaries we have encountered in descriptions of feminine male beauty and cross-dressing, on the one hand, and the rigid gender hierarchy in the subordination of women and sexual segregation, on the other; ironically, the latter necessitates many instances of cross-dressing. While masculinity and femininity were defined less categorically, the status and power associated with an individual once his or her gender identity was determined tended to be hierarchized more rigidly.

In fact, the very discursive power of male literati writings on interchange-ability was, paradoxically, closely associated with a hierarchical gender sys-tem that was based on women’s subordination. When a scholar-official pre-sented himself as an abandoned-but-still-faithful wife and protested about being neglected, he was promoting himself before his lord as a virtuous sub-ject precisely because a woman’s virtue, in this idealized hierarchical gen-der system, was defined almost exclusively in terms of her submission and chastity. That is, women could not have been effective metaphors in these writings had they not been the natural models of submission and chastity, yet women were significant only as metaphors. At the same time, such
metaphors also complicated the male author’s gender identity, and, the possibility of feminization had always to be entertained.

While the effectiveness of cross-dressing seems to point to the ill-defined boundaries between the feminine and the masculine, a woman’s very need to resort to transvestism in order to free herself from her assigned gender role testifies to the rigid sexual segregation in the society. Simply put, the need to avail oneself of this interchangeability is the direct result of segregation and subordination. This is why in the end a cross-dresser has always to “undress” herself to reaffirm the hierarchical gender system her transvestism appears to have initially subverted (see chapter 3). Here we seem to have another paradox: men and women are supposed to be interchangeable in many aspects, but this interchangeability becomes meaningful or can be actualized only when it enhances or reproduces the analogous hierarchical positioning of prince versus minister and men versus women. (A minister should be as loyal to his prince as a woman is faithful to her husband.) Analogy becomes effective only when it underscores differences in social or gender status. This confirms the simple but important fact that gender relationships are in many ways power relationships.

The differentiation strategy appears to be more straightforward. Here masculinity is always defined in sharp contrast to femininity, and the distinctions are assumed to be completely stable and unproblematic. Here women are usually considered a threat to men’s manhood, while romantic sentiment is always viewed with deep suspicion. Masculinity is gauged by a man’s ability to distance himself from women, and implications of misogyny are almost always there; here elements from the popular discourse (in contrast to the elite discourse) are more likely to be evident. However, even in texts where the analogy strategy is obviously favored, many of the basic assumptions behind the differentiation strategy, such as the subordination of women, are always there to frame the negotiation of gender identity. The two strategies are not inherently exclusive of each other because hierarchy and social inequality are the basic principles underpinning both. Furthermore, I argue that both of these strategies are necessitated by the ambivalent status assigned to women in late imperial cultural discourses. Women had two very different functions: they could be viewed as sources of corruption and as fatal threats to men’s gender integrity, and, at the same time, they could be viewed as the exemplars of many Confucian virtues (especially obedience and unconditional loyalty).

In the classic Ming novel San’guo yanyi (The Romance of the Three Kingdoms) these two strategies are simultaneously employed to construct the novel’s intricate gender structure. San’guo yanyi is composed of the stories of a group of masculine heroes in the context of a protracted civil war. However, women’s roles are much more important than many readers have so far realized, despite their relatively limited presence in the novel.10 Here manliness is often defined by a hero’s ability to disassociate himself from
women, and especially from their perceived bad influence, which is regarded as one of the most serious threats to manhood. Yet despite the deep anxiety over bad feminine influence, a number of women are presented as the natural exemplars of certain Confucian virtues such as loyalty and chastity. Moreover, it appears that these exemplary women are often made to serve as excuses for some masculine heroes’ apparent moral deficiencies. This draws our attention to the uneasy tension between the masculinity envisioned in the novel and the virtue of loyalty widely celebrated in Confucian discourses. The tactic of deferring the moral high ground to women is related to the perception that demands of unconditional loyalty and obedience sometimes undermine the masculinity of a male subject (chen) or hero in his relation to the lord (jun) he is serving, as Mencius (ca. 371–289 BCE) argued a long time ago (see chapter 1). In San’guo yanyi, a novel supposedly about male heroes, women are indispensable to the negotiation of masculinity. On the one hand, they are presented as threats to manhood; on the other hand, they are celebrated as paragons of loyalty and chastity, often more virtuous than men. The implication is that Confucian virtues such as unconditional loyalty or obedience are female virtues par excellence and therefore are probably not the most desirable masculine qualities during times of political disorder. In other words, if a lord turns out to be unworthy, a hero, unlike a woman married to an unworthy husband, is entitled to switch loyalties. Whereas a woman is defined by her unconditional obedience and loyalty, a masculine hero is characterized by his ability to choose a worthy lord to serve, as well as his right to switch to another if the chosen lord turns out to be unworthy. The ambivalent ethical meanings assigned to women and their roles in the construction of the novel’s models of masculinity have considerably complicated the gender structure of San’guo yanyi (more in chapter 5).

Based on the generic nature of the texts under examination, my study is divided into three parts. The first explores works that fall into the category of elite discourse, where the analogy strategy is often favored. It focuses on the Confucian classics, historiography, political treatises, and collections of literati writings. I trace the changing significance of a series of feminine tropes frequently deployed in literati self-representation: from the emasculated (castrato) to abandoned women to chaste widows and finally to prostitutes. I explore what the choice of a particular trope can tell us about the gender psyche of a male literati author. One important symbolic figure examined in this part is that of a loyal minister, or zhongchen: how is his gender status complicated as well as problematized by the contingencies of loyalty, and how is his manhood problematized by his different and sometimes conflicting obligations to the emperor, his superiors, and his peers?

The second part concentrates on a dozen works of vernacular fiction, which often contains elements from both elite and nonelite cultures. The focus shifts to a group of related but competing models of masculinity, such
as yingxiong (heroes), haohan (stalwarts), caizi (romantic scholars), and shengxian (sages), exploring how these competing models evolve and complicate one another. Here the concept of loyalty is further interrogated in terms of its gender implications, and the centrality of “loyal minister” is challenged by alternative models of masculinity.

Although women are still presented as the defining “other” in these works, much more attention is now devoted to the implications of the actual (rather than metaphorical) presence of women in a man’s life. Compared with the texts discussed in the first part, the presence of women in these fictional works appears to be much less prominent. However, the central question here remains more or less the same—namely, how a man negotiates his gender identity in relation to the feminine. How to maintain an appropriate distance from women remains a crucial issue in the construction process of masculinity. Here the ambivalence of the feminine explored in part 1 begins to take on a slightly different form: a masculine hero needs to prove his manliness by distancing himself from women, and yet, at the same time, his heroic image often needs to be authenticated or enhanced by the appreciation of a beautiful woman, as espoused in the so-called hero-beauty (yingxiong meiren) convention. Another interesting question, arising from the several novels dominated by caizi, is how to interpret the gender implications of the romantic scholars’ apparent resemblance to women in terms of both appearance and personality. Instead of being condemned in these novels, certain feminine qualities are often celebrated as indications of a man’s cultural sophistication and sensitivity. A feminine-looking man is not necessarily considered effeminate, and a subtle distinction now appears between the feminine and the effeminate. While femininity can be a positive attribute in a man, effeminacy remains the sign of a less manly man. Whether this interchangeability with the feminine points to certain different models of masculinity is another issue explored in detail in chapters 7 and 8. Owing to its unique generic nature, fiction is more likely to deviate from the values made normative in various canonical writings such as the Confucian classics and official historiography. Even when trying hard to propagate Zhu Xi’s (1130–1200) Neo-Confucian notion of masculine hero, the author of the eighteenth-century novel Yesou puyan (The Humble Words of a Rustic) could not help but problematize it by (perhaps inadvertently) exposing its limitations. In a work of fiction a neat Confucian doctrine is often thrown into a messy context of different contingencies where adjustments and accommodations are unavoidable. Yesou puyan exposes the enormous tensions generated by the conflicting demands of its author’s ideal of a perfect Confucian: a romantic caizi, a chivalrous haohan, and a Confucian sage.

The third part of this study deals with prescriptive advice literature, which usually targets the social elite as its main audience. In many works of household instruction, or jiaxun, masculinity is often negotiated within the
context of a patriarchal lineage family. Here women are almost always presented as potential threats to the stability and continuity of the male lineage since they are considered “outsiders” from another family. An acid test for a son’s familial loyalty after he marries is whether he will side with his parents and brothers or his wife/wives in a family dispute. Here manliness is defined largely in terms of a man’s sacred blood relationship with his male relatives. The anxiety over women that filled many works of household instruction is indeed remarkable given that women are integral to the functioning of any patriarchal family. In conduct books not focused on the family, however, the implications of the feminine tend to be much more complicated. Some of these books seem to subscribe to the hero-beauty convention in emphasizing the positive implications of the feminine in a man’s attempts to come to terms with his manhood. Some of these books also draw our attention to the increasingly diverse models of masculinity available in late imperial China, as well as the resultant confusion over the blurring boundaries of many seemingly stable definitions of masculinity. It is also here that we revisit the tension between hero and sage (the two competing models of masculinity in many Confucian discourses), a topic of heated debate among the literati ever since Zhu Xi proposed his definition of a true hero.

One of the common themes in most of the works examined in this study is that masculinity is a fluid concept, and, paradoxically, a man becomes concerned with its articulation only when he feels discriminated against by other men. That is, it often becomes an urgent issue when a man feels compelled to distinguish himself from the weaker sex, while women, as the defining “other,” are always needed in this re/masculinizing process, no matter what the specific strategies. Consequently, masculinity is almost always fraught with anxiety over the perceived lack of what is considered masculine. To the extent that masculinity is a construct contingent upon its lack or absence, it is an ideal that can never be completely fulfilled. In a sense, almost all strategies for constructing masculinity are also attempts to come to terms with a man’s anxiety over not having what he is supposed to have.

The issue of masculinity began to attract the attention of China scholars only very recently, and almost all the important studies on this subject have been published in the new millennium. To my knowledge, there have been only three monographs in English published on this topic: Xueping Zhong’s Masculinity Besieged? (2000); Kam Louie’s Theorising Chinese Masculinity (2002); and Geng Song’s The Fragile Scholar (2003). Neither Zhong nor Louie focuses on pre-twentieth-century China, although the latter devotes considerable attention to the continuities in the long history of Chinese masculinities. Louie’s study, which concentrates on the wen-wu (civil versus military) polarity, is invaluable in illuminating some of the large patterns of masculinities envisioned in both traditional and modern Chinese cultural discourses. Much less ambitious and more focused on the late imperial
period, my study strives to be more historical as well as more empirical. Appreciating the value and importance of theorizing and paradigms, I am, however, more reluctant to offer an overarching definition of “Chinese masculinity.” Instead, I emphasize the contingencies of masculinity, although I also try to address issues such as continuities and trends. This is one of the reasons why I have avoided the term “Chinese masculinity” and instead prefer the plural form, “Chinese masculinities.” The caizi, the focus of Song’s study, are also explored in detail in the second part of this book, although caizi are only one of the several masculine models I examine, and my examples tend to be taken from fictional works of a later historical period. I am more interested in how the model of caizi interacts with other competing models. Much attention is devoted to the mutations of caizi as they are represented in several novels from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Compared with the studies noted above, this book focuses more on the question of how different models of masculinity were proposed and negotiated in relation to the feminine rather than trying to define what late imperial Chinese masculinities were. I hope to shed light on the intriguing question of why, in trying to come to terms with their own gender identities, many late imperial Chinese literati wrote so much about the feminine, sometimes even appealing to the interchangeability between the masculine and the feminine, while never doubting the naturalness of gender inequality.

This study is not meant to be a chronological survey of late imperial Chinese masculinities, although it is conceived as a historical study concentrating on what I consider to be several historically significant “moments” in the long late imperial period. Trained as a literary historian, I have tried nonetheless to move beyond what has usually been considered “literary” by including in my discussion works from a great variety of genres, some of which fall outside the narrowly defined domain of literature. I hope that there are enough differences and contradictions in the limited number of cases I have examined to give us a feel for the pluralistic nature of the notions of masculinity and their intricate nuances as they were constantly contested and re/invented in late imperial China.